

Urgent but Overlooked: The Literacy Crisis Among Adolescent English Language Learners

In 2004–2005, America’s public schools enrolled more than 5 million English language learners (ELLs), students whose proficiency in spoken and/or written English is not yet strong enough to permit them to succeed in an English-language classroom setting without extra support.

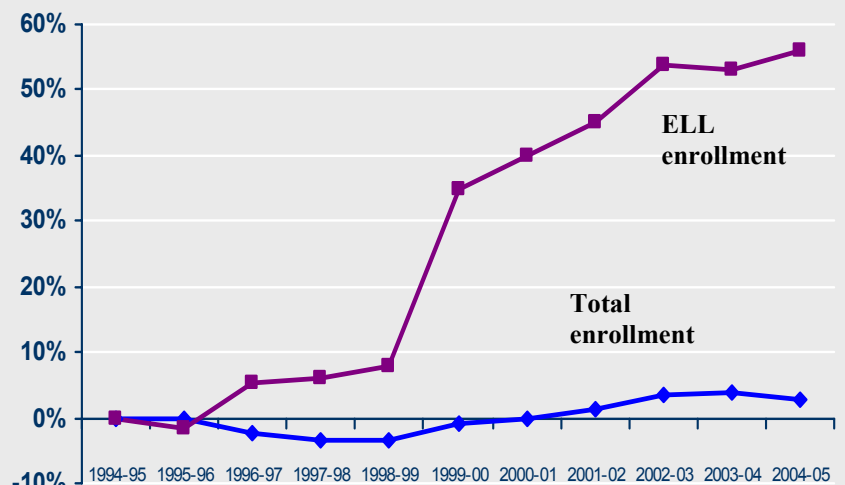
ELLs now comprise 10.5 percent of the nation’s total pre-K–12 school enrollment, up from 5 percent in 1990 (Hoffman & Sable, 2006). These children comprise the fastest-growing segment of the student population, with the highest growth rates occurring in grades 7–12 (Kindler, 2002). Further, ELL enrollments are soaring in almost every part of the country, including states that have not, in recent decades, been home to large ELL populations, such as Nebraska, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia (Batalova et al., 2007; Capps et al., 2005).

However, while ELLs may be growing in numbers, in other respects they are being left behind.

As a group, ELLs are among the country’s lowest-performing students, scoring far below the national average on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (known as NAEP, or the “Nation’s Report Card”). In 2005, 31 percent of all eighth graders were found to be at least proficient in reading (that is, reading at roughly an eighth-grade level or higher); for ELLs, the figure was just 4 percent (NCES, 2005). It should come as no surprise, then, that ELLs complete high school at very low rates. Among eighth graders who reported to the 2000 U.S. Census that they spoke English with difficulty, only 49 percent went on to earn a diploma four years later (NCES, 2004).

ELLs: The Fastest-Growing Population in U.S. Schools

Rate of total K–12 and ELL enrollment growth, 1995–2005



Source: NCELA, 2004

For more detail on the topics discussed in this issue brief, please see

Double the Work:
Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for English Language Learners
A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York

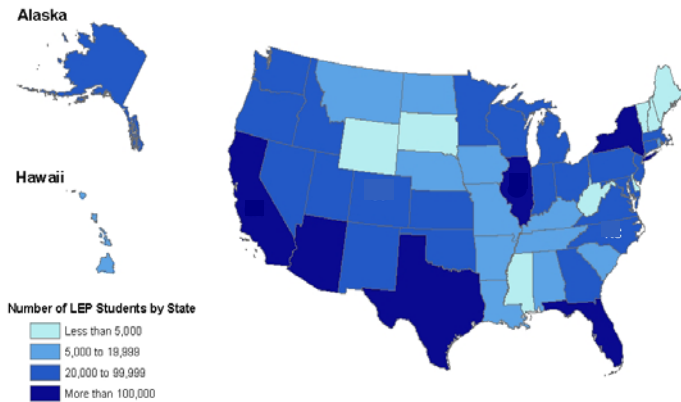
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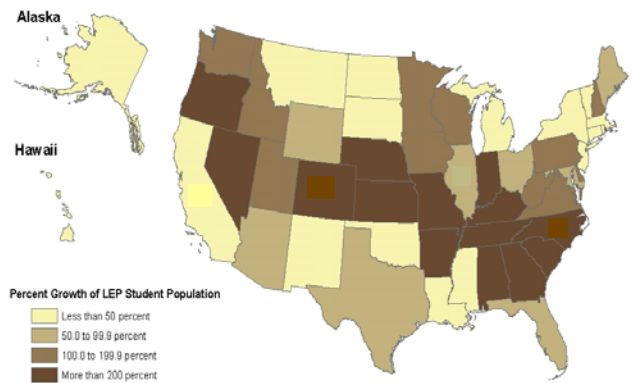
**ELL students are concentrated
in a handful of states ...**

... but that's changing fast.

ELL student population by state, 2003–04



ELL student population growth, 1993–2004



Source: Batalova et al., 2007

Faced with the rapidly increasing enrollments of ELLs, and recognizing that the nation's schools must do far more to help these students build strong literacy skills, teachers and administrators everywhere are asking for guidance. How, they want to know, does one teach adolescent ELLs to read and write proficiently, as well as complete a rigorous math, science, and social studies curriculum, in a language they are still in the process of mastering? How should those students be assessed? What sorts of professional development will their teachers need? And what policy changes will be required?

Research on Adolescent ELLs and Literacy

In some ways, the literacy needs of adolescent English language learners are identical to those of their English-proficient peers. Research suggests that:

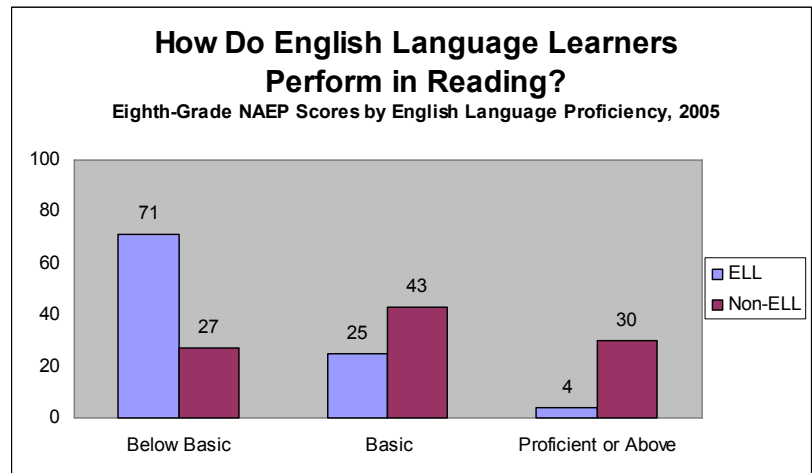
- All struggling adolescent readers, whatever their first language, tend to benefit from intensive, explicit, ongoing instruction in reading-comprehension strategies and vocabulary development (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).
- Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing skills for ELLs just as they are for native English speakers (August, 2002; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).
- Many adolescents, both native and non-native English speakers, have out-of-school literacy skills and interests that their teachers may not even know about, but which could serve as a springboard for learning in the classroom (Moje et al., 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

In other ways, however, literacy challenges faced by adolescent English language learners are distinct from those of adolescents in general. Some important research findings include:



Strong literacy skills in a native language are likely to transfer to English (August, 2002; Riches & Genesee, 2006), and students who received a solid education before moving to the United States are more likely to succeed in U.S. schools, too. The transition may be slow and difficult for a variety of academic and personal reasons, but for the most part those students eventually become fluent, capable readers and writers in English.

- Students often do not read and write in English at the same level they speak it. Many students learn to converse fluently in English long before they can read the language; others learn to read and write competently in English before they can follow and participate in spoken conversation (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Students' instructional needs can depend in part upon their native language. For example, speakers of Mandarin Chinese often benefit from targeted attention to the use of the Roman alphabet, and to the ways in which letters and sounds correspond in English. On the other hand, when working with native Spanish speakers, teachers may want to spend more class time reviewing cognates—words that are similar in English and Spanish, and which can help with reading comprehension (August 2003; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).
- Lack of background knowledge can pose additional barriers to comprehension. For example, ELLs, especially immigrant students, may know little about U.S. history, making it difficult for them to follow a textbook chapter on the Civil War. Many textbooks also use cultural referents and idiomatic expressions that are unfamiliar to ELLs. Often, teachers can help by relating the material to students' own knowledge and experience, or by taking time to provide important background information before going ahead with a reading assignment (Bernhardt, 2005).
- Introducing new vocabulary and content in multiple classes at the same time can benefit students. This technique reinforces information in different contexts. For example, the science teacher might focus on the ecology of the western United States while the English teacher assigns a historical novel set in California and the history teacher focuses on the westward migration. However, adolescent ELLs need assistance with more than just topic-specific vocabulary like wagon train, Oregon Trail, or desert; they need to learn academic terms like process, justify, elaborate, and compare, as well.
- A teacher's explanation in the student's native language can help students understand difficult academic material. Another helpful technique allows students to explain concepts and terms to each other. Other options for clarifying or explaining information in the native language include the use of bilingual dictionaries, glossaries, or websites (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Several research studies have found also that students in bilingual programs (receiving instruction in their native language and in English) outperformed students in English-medium programs (receiving instruction only in English) on measures of English reading proficiency (Lindholm-Leary, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006).



Key Policy Questions

While researchers have only begun to focus on effective literacy instruction for adolescent ELLs, enough is known already about those students' demographic trends, educational challenges, and school performance to suggest a number of specific areas that need attention from local, state, and federal policymakers:

Who is and who isn't an ELL?

The U.S. Department of Education defines an English language learner—or, to use the department's term, a “Limited English Proficient” (LEP) student—as a student between the ages of three and twenty-one who is “enrolled in elementary or secondary education, often born outside the United States or speaking a language other than English at home, and not having sufficient mastery of English to meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom” (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Within those broad parameters, however, states and districts apply all sorts of differing criteria. For example, in some places an ELL student is defined as any student who is *eligible* for special ELL services, while in other places the label applies only to students who are actually *enrolled* in special programs or classes. Some schools and districts *designate* students as ELLs, while others require students and their parents to *apply* for ELL status and services. And while some schools and districts define students as ELLs based on their *spoken* English proficiency, others use *written* tests to determine ELL status.

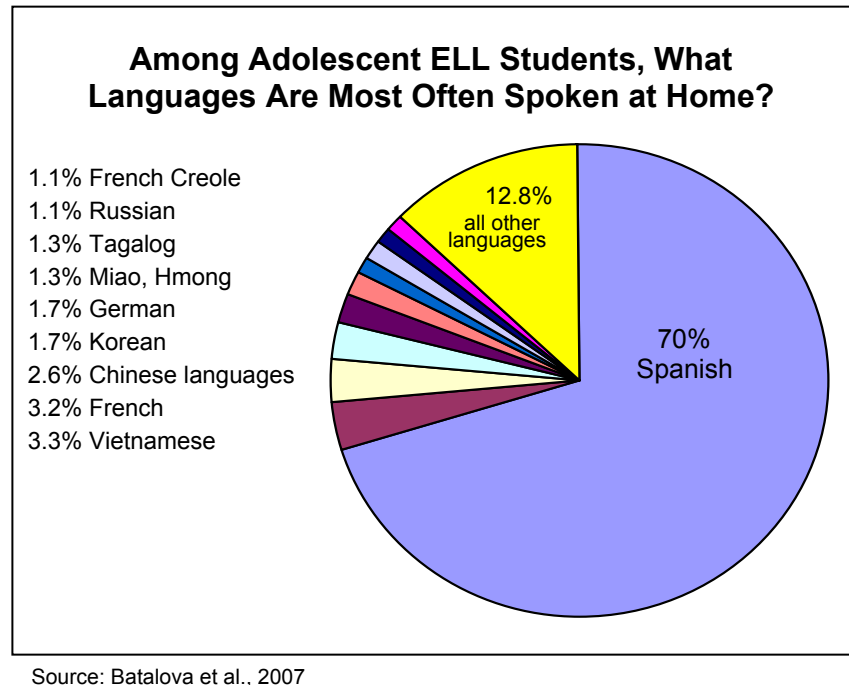
In previous decades, schools faced no real pressure to reconcile these competing definitions. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), however, they are required to identify ELLs consistently, measure their skills, and demonstrate that they are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward proficiency in math and reading. Therefore, it has become more imperative that schools, districts, and states determine precisely who counts as an English language learner or as a *former* ELL (one who no longer needs ELL services). Clear and consistent definitions will permit schools to comply with federal guidelines, and they will help ensure that students receive the services to which they are entitled.

How should adolescent ELLs' literacy skills be assessed?

Given the diversity of the ELLs now enrolled in the nation's schools—in terms of race and ethnicity, home languages, income, educational background, mobility, and many other variables—it can be extremely difficult to determine precisely what sorts of instruction individual students require. Even the most experienced middle or high school teacher can be hard pressed to discern whether a given student is going through the normal process of learning to read in a new language or might need special attention and services. For example, one student may never have attended school or learned to read in any language, while another is highly fluent in a native language but has little knowledge of the English alphabet, grammar, or vocabulary; a third student may speak and read English at an elementary level; a fourth may simply need glasses; and a fifth may have a language-processing disorder.



The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, an expert group commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, notes that “assessments are essential for gauging the individual strengths and weaknesses of language-minority students, making placement decisions, and tailoring instruction to meet student needs” (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, the panel concludes that most of the existing assessment tools are poorly designed. It’s no surprise, then, that some ELLs are placed in special education classes they don’t need (Artiles, 1998) while others are overlooked for services they should receive, or that some ELLs are taught content they already know while others are placed in classes that are way over their heads (Echevarria & Graves, 2003; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Solano-Flores, 2003).



Educators and policymakers must demand that testing experts and publishers develop more and better literacy assessments for adolescent ELLs, including both diagnostic tools and assessments that measure students’ ongoing progress. Until those are developed, however, educators should take it upon themselves to learn as much as possible about students’ previous schooling, the extent to which they are literate in a native language, and the extent to which they have received specialized reading instruction in the past. Moreover, schools should make every effort to assess those students’ literacy skills and content knowledge both in English and—especially in the case of new immigrant students—in their native languages, so as to avoid placing them in inappropriate programs or classes and to ensure they receive the services and supports they need to succeed.

What kinds of support will enable teachers to provide effective literacy instruction for ELLs?

Having trained as content area specialists, most secondary-level teachers (in math, science, social studies, English, or other fields) know little about how to teach reading and writing to native English speakers, much less how to provide literacy instruction to ELLs. At present, just one state—Arizona—requires every teacher to complete both pre- and in-service training in English-language instruction. Furthermore, content area teachers do not necessarily see it as their job to teach literacy or English-language skills. If students need that sort of support, some teachers would argue, then they should get it from reading instructors and teachers of English as a second language.

Yet, if ELLs are going to master the high-level reading and writing skills that are required to succeed in the content area courses that make up the bulk of the secondary school curriculum, they will need ongoing, well-coordinated literacy instruction in all of their classes. Not every educator should bear precisely the same responsibility for working with English language learners—content area teachers cannot be expected



to do the job of specialists in English-language instruction. However, and certainly in schools with moderate to large ELL enrollments, every teacher and administrator should be called upon, and given the necessary training, time, and resources, to assess those students, to help them succeed in the given subject area, and to work collaboratively with teachers who do have primary responsibility for ELL programs and services.

Across the country, and especially in states with fast-growing ELL populations, pre- and in-service professional development programs should challenge common misconceptions about ELLs' needs and abilities, and they should offer concrete strategies for teaching ELLs the vocabulary of the given subject area, showing them explicitly how to read and write in that discipline, and helping them translate their existing knowledge, skills, and vocabulary into English.

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Given the diverse backgrounds and literacy needs of ELLs, what kinds of programs should be offered?

No single, one-size-fits-all teaching strategy, curriculum, or reading intervention is likely to work for every adolescent English language learner. Even if a given ELL population appears on the surface to be relatively homogenous, assessments will no doubt reveal that those students have all sorts of differing educational backgrounds and needs. Thus, states and districts may wish to give middle and high schools some flexibility to structure instructional time, class size, course design, and other organizational features in ways that best serve their particular ELL students.

For instance, research suggests that, on average, a ninth-grade English language learner will require between four and seven years of instruction in order to read and write as well as a typical twelfth-grade native English speaker (Hakuta et al., 2000). In some cases, schools can make up this extra instructional time by increasing the hours in the school day or days in the school year. However, that may not be an option for many students, particularly those who are obligated to work after school and/or over the summer. Another option is for schools to build additional time into the schedule by permitting newly arrived immigrant ELLs to stay in high school for more than the usual four years (Garcia, 1999). Schools that undertake to provide this additional time where needed should not be penalized by accountability systems.

Another alternative is to offer content classes in students' native languages so they can acquire core content credits at the same time that they are acquiring academic English. Some states and districts allow immigrant students who enter at ninth grade or higher to demonstrate their content knowledge from schooling in their home country by taking tests based on state content standards in the native language and receiving graduation credit if they pass.

Schools may also choose to reduce class size as a way to better serve adolescent ELLs (Boyson & Short, 2003; Crandall et al., 1998; Garcia, 1999). While smaller class size alone is not enough to ensure better instruction and improve student achievement, small schools and small classes can allow effective educators to implement positive changes, including innovative programs, alternative teaching methods, and individualized attention for students.



What research is needed to improve literacy instruction for adolescent ELLs?

The current knowledge base on English language learners is much more extensive at the elementary level than it is at the middle and high school levels. Of the 309 studies identified for review by the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006), fewer than thirty focused on students in grades 6–12. Likewise, the research says far more about the teaching of native Spanish speakers than it does about the teaching of speakers from all other language backgrounds combined (Genesee et al., 2006).

Many promising practices have been identified in schools and districts around the nation, and anecdotal evidence is strong that these interventions are having a positive impact. A mix of targeted qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to generate and test new literacy interventions for adolescent ELLs (research and development studies) and to explore the effectiveness of existing interventions for this group (rigorous evaluations). In light of the diversity among ELLs, we need to learn whether some interventions work better for students of certain language or educational backgrounds or at specific stages of English proficiency. It would also be useful to know if certain combined interventions are more effective than one intervention alone. In addition, the field would benefit from research on adolescent ELLs' current performance in school and from longitudinal studies of ELLs' literacy development, particularly studies that follow students after they reach former ELL status.

Conclusion

The nation's goal is—and should be—the education of *all* its students, including those struggling to learn English and become proficient readers, writers, speakers, and listeners. Without highly developed literacy skills, adolescent ELLs will have little chance for success in school, college, and work, and the consequences will be dire, not only for those individuals but for the economic, political, and social well-being of the wider community.

All Americans rely upon the education of English language learners. It is time to make adolescent ELL literacy development a national priority.

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